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CRIME

"The KGB Organized Everything"

A raucous confession from Pope John Paul II's assailant

For months, newspapers were awash with a spectacular charge: the attempt on Pope John Paul II's life in 1981, declared Italian authorities last winter, had the backing of the Bulgarian secret service, presumably acting on orders from the Soviet Union. But the accusation depended on the secret confession of the gunman convicted of the shooting, Turkish Terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca, and as the unhurried investigation into his claims continued without producing further important revelations, interest in the case slowly dwindled. Now the intrigue has leaped suddenly back to life. As he was taken from a Rome police station last week, Agca surprised waiting reporters by publicly implicating the Soviets in the conspiracy. Said he: "The KGB organized everything."

In a chaotic encounter outside the police station, the slim, unshaven Turk for the first time confirmed previously published accounts of his confession to Italian investigators. Speaking in broken English and flawed Italian, he claimed that he was trained as a terrorist "in Bulgaria and in Syria." Italian officials believe that Agca was aided in the assassination attempt by three Bulgarians: two former employees at the Rome embassy and Sergei Ivanov Antonov, onetime Rome manager of the Bulgarian airline, who is now being held in a Rome jail pending the outcome of the investigation. Was Antonov involved? newsmen asked, as Agca climbed into a police van. "I knew Sergei," he replied. "He was my accomplice." And the KGB? "Yes, the KGB."

Agca's allegations provided no new details of the plot. But by repeating in

public the charges made in his secret confession, which until now have been reported only secondhand, Agca buttressed the Italian investigators' claim of East bloc involvement. Agca, however, has changed his story repeatedly in the past, and critics of the government investigation fear that the case depends almost entirely on his possibly unreliable testimony. To no one's surprise, Bulgarian and Soviet officials have vehemently denied any part in the conspiracy.

Agca's unexpected comments came as he was being questioned by police in connection with a peculiar kidnaping case. Emanuela Orlandi, 15, the daughter of a messenger in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, vanished on June 22 after talking with a man in a black BMW on the street in front of her music school in downtown Rome. Last Wednesday, following an appeal from the Pope for her safe return, the abductors finally unveiled their startling demand. In a call to Orlandi's family, the kidnapers announced that the girl would be freed only if Agca were released. The Vatican, they added, should intercede with the Italian government to obtain his freedom.

Through its official newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican promptly rejected a role as intermediary, saying that the kidnapers were demanding "absurd compensations." Even Agca wanted no part of the deal: he is well aware that only his Italian jailers stand between him and possible Soviet retribution for his confessions. Said the onetime terrorist: "I appeal to the kidnapers: free this poor girl. I have nothing to do with criminals. I am with Italy, with the Italian people, with the Vatican." ■